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To the Parents of Students in the Union-Endicott School District:

As you are aware, last week, Union-Endicott High School implemented a “lockdown” due to a 911 report that an armed male entered the school. School district and public safety personnel immediately applied established protocols for the situation. No weapon was recovered, but there are some important lessons to be learned from the day’s events.

Though professional news and social media comments after the incident were largely complementary, I noted some negative comments by emotional parents, apparently frustrated with a lack of notification about unfolding events. Some parents wanted immediate notification while the incident unfolded. Another suggested the district denied a parental “right to know” why they couldn’t go inside the building or get their kids out. Other comments, supportive of the school and public safety response, paraphrased text conversations between parent and child during the lockdown. A very disturbing report I heard was of a parent telling their child to leave the school, regardless what they were instructed.

As a parent of four with two still in high-school, I understand feelings of fear and panic during a lockdown. My kids are not in the U-E district, so when they lockdown, I face the same information gap and helplessness as other parents. Not knowing is the worst, because you can’t help if you don’t know the problem. This drives the need for immediate information to know your child is safe, sometimes by texting or calling them. In other cases, children feel more comfortable if they contact their parents for comfort in stressful situations and they reach out via text or telephone.

As a parent I truly understand these concerns, but right now you don’t need to hear from me as a parent; you need to hear from me as a police chief who is also an empathetic parent. I’m telling you bluntly, for your own child’s safety, that your need for information may endanger your child’s life, or someone else’s.

Earlier, I mentioned protocols. Responders and district personnel take emergency action to meet certain objectives based on priority. The first priority is safety and that begins with the lockdown, followed by any number of actions too numerous to write here. Every action in the first stage of a school emergency relates to the objective of getting people safe.

The tough pill to swallow as a parent is that your need for information is not a safety objective for your child or anyone else. Providing you or the news media information is an important objective, but not an immediate one, because it does nothing to enhance safety. It’s also very important the information you

are provided is accurate because inaccurate information can also endanger people. It takes time to get accurate information in an emergency.

When you receive notification of an emergency; or that your child is safe (or hurt); or you contact your child via text or telephone, the truth is that the ONLY objective being fulfilled at that moment is *your personal need for information!* Flooding school district or 911 phone lines for information depletes valuable human and physical resources (e.g. cell towers), to fill your information gap. Worse yet is making contact or conversing with your child in the lockdown. Doing so actually endangers rather than enhances your child's safety! Your child is not safer because you are made aware of the details causing the lockdown, and that assumes the information you received is accurate (it probably isn't). Your child is not safer because you know they are safe. You may feel better hearing their voice, but your communication with them to make yourself feel better (or possibly worse depending on the news) may actually endanger their life.

Think about it: phones usually give an audible alert or vibration during calls or texts. Imagine a lockdown and your child is hiding in a classroom or a closet. An armed intruder stands only a few feet away when your child's phone rings or vibrates. Is the consequence of your child's location being revealed worth your need for immediate information?

The reality is there is absolutely nothing you can do during a lockdown to enhance your child's safety, except to let public safety and school personnel do their job! The harsh reality is that most parental instincts push you to do the exact opposite of what your child needs to be safe as possible!

Contact with your child may alert an intruder to their location. You may give them information or tell them to do something based on inaccurate information. Contact with 911 or your child floods cell towers and phone lines and delays emergency work from being done. Responding to the school creates divided attention by police officers responsible for your child's safety and yours. You also limit movement of emergency vehicles that can't get access to areas as freely or quickly. I can go on, but hopefully you get the point.

What you should do is stay by your phone to receive information as soon as it can be safely provided. To do so assists with giving you accurate information about your child's health and safety, or where you can go to reunify with them. If your child texts or calls you during an incident, tell them to turn their phone to silent, or better yet off, and text only emergency information such as if they know the location of the perpetrator or if life-saving emergency medical treatment is needed. You should only call 911 to relate similar emergency information.

The students at U-E are your kids, but during the school day they are also the school district's kids. During an emergency or safety event, they become my kids, my School Resource Officer's kids, and the kids' of every Endicott police officer, on-duty or off-duty, close enough to respond. They are also quickly adopted by other police and public safety personnel, like last week when troopers, sheriff's deputies, Vestal Police Officers and Broome County Emergency Services personnel all responded to the call.

Providing you with accurate information is at the forefront of our non-safety related objectives. It's at the top of the list the moment it is safe to be at the top of the list, but it will never take precedence over safety. You should also take comfort knowing when the emergency was over, school and police personnel immediately reflected on what went right and what could be better. We have already met formally for a detailed after-action review to ensure our kids are even safer next time.

Unfortunately, details of the incident can't be revealed because a criminal prosecution necessitates evidence and testimony must be preserved. That said, I think it is important to recognize potentially life-saving actions taken by people who thought an armed intruder entered the school.

It all began with a student alerting an adult to the critical situation and the adult immediately calling 911. I commend both of them for the willingness to enact the "if you see something, say something" procedure. Within three minutes of the 911 call, the perpetrator was in custody. Part of the reason he was taken into custody so quickly was because of the quick and decisive action of the High School Principal initiating the lockdown, then helping responding police officers track-down and locate the suspect. Police officers are commended for their quick response, containment of the area and deliberate movement toward harm, not away from it. School administration are commended for immediately initiating emergency response protocols that coordinated efforts and led to a quick resolution of the incident. Students and school staff are commended for how well and quickly they implemented school lockdown procedures. If the incident had not been resolved so quickly, students and staff were well-prepared. Last but never least, dispatchers in Broome County Emergency Services are commended for coordinating the first responder resources and making critical safety notifications.

Though the perpetrator was in custody very quickly, school staff and first-responders conducted thorough searches of the school and grounds while conducting a preliminary investigation to be sure that all of the gathered information was accurate, that we weren't missing anything, and that all students, staff and visitors were, in fact, safe before the lockdown was lifted.

As a Union-Endicott parent, you should be proud of your children and their school district. You can rest assured that even though things went very well during this lockdown, the district is already working on how to be better next time.

Very Truly Yours,



Patrick J. Garey
Chief of Police